Equality and Human Rights Commission

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Minutes of the Board call (17 February).

17 February 2021 (10:00-12:00) - Via video conference using WebEx

Attending:
Commissioners
Baroness Kishwer Falkner (Chair); Caroline Waters (Deputy Chair); Suzanne Baxter; Jessica Butcher; Pavita Cooper; David Goodhart; Susan Johnson; Helen Mahy; Lord Bernard Ribeiro and Su-Mei Thompson.

Officers
Christopher Corfield, Senior Associate – Strategy Hub
Cath Denholm, Executive Director - Corporate Improvement and England
Melanie Field, Executive Director - Wales and Strategy and Policy
Julie Jarman, Senior Principal – Strategy Hub
Callum MacInnes, Principal – Corporate Governance
Rebecca Newsome, Principal – Head of Is Britain Fairer programme
Lauren Payne, Principal – Strategy Hub
Alastair Pringle, Acting Chief Executive
Luke Taylor, Director – Evidence and Strategy Hub
Graham Wheaton, Senior Associate – Corporate Governance
Sarah Whelan, Senior Associate – Corporate Governance

1. Chair's introduction

1.1 The Chair welcomed attendees. Alastair Pringle attended as acting Chief Executive.

2. Apologies for absence

2.1 Alasdair Henderson, Rebecca Hilsenrath, Martyn Jones and Dr Lesley Sawers sent apologies.

3. Declarations of interest

3.1 No declarations were made additional to those already registered.

4. Strategic planning context

4.1 Luke Taylor and Melanie Field introduced the session and set out the context and background to the discussion, where it was explained that the next Strategic Plan would be published in April 2022.

4.2 The Board were made aware that the Commission was under a statutory duty to review and consult on its strategic priorities every three years and to assess progress towards equality and human rights outcomes in Great Britain. This is achieved through the delivery of Is Britain Fairer? and its supplementary publications for Wales, Scotland and England. These reports inform the strategic planning process and ensure the Commission's priorities are grounded in evidence. Key issues are identified through looking at the evidence of outcomes for people, and from considering what is emerging of relevance through horizon scanning and intelligence gathering.

4.3 It was noted that agreement by the Board of the priority issues would inform the basis of the public consultation. The consultation responses would then inform the development of the final version of the plan.

5. Discussion

5.1 A wide ranging discussion took place, covering issues including: the impacts of the pandemic; devolution and regional differences; social cohesion; climate change; artificial intelligence and technology. The Board agreed that the evidence base and prioritisation criteria was right. The board requested an assurance that the themes chosen would be sufficiently strategic and high level to allow flexibility on specific areas of work.

5.2 The Board were asked to give specific consideration to how the Commission should work, what the Commission should work on and who the Commission should work with. The following key points were made during these discussions:

5.2.1 How the Commission should work:

a) **Approach and methods** - the theory of change model should be embedded practically whilst allowing flexibility to adapt to changing internal and external environments. There is also a need to clarify and define the Commission's unique role and then to occupy that space;

b) **Powers and levers** - the use of the Commission's inquiry and enforcement powers may achieve greater visibility for the organisation but these are resource intensive and may not always result in a tangible societal change; and

c) **Devolution** - whilst there was support for a GB strategy, sensitivity was required for different contexts across nations and regions which may require Scotland and Wales Committee input.

5.2.2 What the Commission should work on:

a) **Evidence / criteria** – specifically to build on the available new existing evidence wherever possible i.e. the impact of technology; the importance of considering data differences across regions was noted and to develop a thematic approach integrating and linking multiple themes. There was support for the continued use of the existing strategic goals and core aim, but the wording of the priority aims should be broader and more future facing e.g. to include issues around the future of work post pandemic and the growing impact of artificial intelligence.

b) **Themes / areas** – there was a need to consider the impact of the pandemic, specifically: the future of work for women, disabled people and older people who will be disproportionately affected through technological change; young people and children in education; and unequal health outcomes, particularly mental health across society. Consideration should be given to issues around poverty and socio-economic disadvantage, in a way which is consistent within the Commissions remit and resources. This might include, for example, focussing on issues such as poor housing, social cohesion (class, race, gender and geographic location) and the intensification of digital exclusion across groups sharing certain protected characteristics.

5.2.3 Who the Commission should work with:

a) **Remit** – there was particular support for the need to build stronger partnerships, especially where other statutory bodies and / or regulators are better placed and equipped to achieve the changes that the Commission wishes to see. Given the fast changing external environment, there is a need to better understand the population in order to ensure that the people most impacted by inequality are considered. There is a need to consider how to ensure that the wider public understand the Commission's remit and reach. The Commission should re-assess its skills and tools to determine where it can have the greatest impact.

b) **Interested parties** – the Commission needs to be more sophisticated in their definition of interested parties and look to individually tailor approaches to engaging with them. Specifically, the Commission should strengthen its engagement with younger people and businesses (who are keen to work with the Commission), through, for example, the use of different channels, such as social media and personal interaction. The Commission should also recognise that it can have different relationships with the same stakeholders at the same time.

6. Next Steps:

6.1 A detailed paper on the timeline and process for agreeing the principles and approach to the next strategic plan will be brought to the March Board meeting, including a summary of this meeting's discussion.

7. Any other business:

7.1 The Chair thanked members for their input to the Board decision made via correspondence regarding gender pay gap reporting (EHRC 2021-02-16). It was confirmed that option 3: defer 2020 / 21 enforcement for six months would take place. In recognition of the pandemic, this allows employers an additional six months to report their 2020 / 21 data.

7.2 With no other business being raised, the Chair thanked Board members and staff for their contributions, and drew the formal meeting to a close.

7.3 The 94th Board meeting would take place on 11 March 2021.